Sisters

by KATHLEEN NORRIS

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

—18—

A last curve, and they knew. Over the of the sharpest and ugliest of the descending precipices, crashing down through the saplings and underbrush and striking the trunks of a score of trees on its way, the heavy car had fallen like a boulder. And Peter saw that it was Alix's car, and with a great cry he sprang over the bank and, slipping and stumbling, followed its mad course down almost to the dry creek bed in the canyon and fell on his knees beside the huddled figure that, erect and strong, in its striped blue gingham, had been Alix only a few short minutes ago.

She had been flung clear of the car, and although every bone in her body was broken, by some miracle the face, except for a deep cut where the brown hair met the tanned forehead, was untouched. And as he caught her in his arms and bent over her with the bitterness of death stopping his own heart, a soft, thick braid loosened and fell like the touch of her hand upon his own, and it seemed to him that in the tranquil face and in the very look of the closed and fast shadowing eyelids he caught a glimpse of Alix's old smile.

Peter forgot everything else in the world. He held her close to him and put his face against her face, and perhaps she had never so truly been his own as in this moment of their parting, when the quiet autumn woodland, shot with long shafts from the sinking sun, rang with his bitter cry:

"No, Alix—not dead! My wife—my wife!"

There were other men and women gathering fast now, and the whole little valley was beginning to ring with the tragedy. After a while some sympathetic man touched Peter on the arm to say that Mrs. Lloyd had fainted, and that if he would please tell them what to do about the other man—he was not yet dead—

Peter roused himself, and with help from half a dozen hands on all sides he carried Alix up to the road and laid her upon a motor robe that some kindly spectator had spread in the deep dust.

Presently he was conscious that a small, slight woman with disorderly fair hair and with her face streaked with dust and tears was standing beside him, and looking down at her, he saw that it was Cherry.

"Yes, Cherry?" he said, moistening his dry lips.

"Peter," she said, "they say Martin's living—he was screaming—" She grew deathly pale and faintness swept

Peter Saw They Were Lifting Martin's Big, Senseless Form.

over her, but she mastered it. "He was caught by that tree," she said. "And he is living. Will you tell them—tell one of these men—that if he will help me, we can drive him home. If you'll tell him that, then I'll get a doctor—"

"Yes, I will," Peter said, not stirring. His eyes had the look of a sleepwalker; he nodded slowly and gravely at her, like a very old man. "You—" he said to a man who had stopped his car near by and who was pressing sympathetically close. "Will you—?"

"If you'll sit in the back seat, dear, and just rest his poor head," a woman said to Cherry. Peter saw that they were lifting Martin's big, senseless form in tender hands and carrying it through the little group. There was a shudder as Martin moaned deeply. Peter went and sat on the low bank by Alix again, and lifted one of her limp hands, and held it. Ah, if in God's mercy and goodness she might moan, he thought, that one slight ray of hope would flood all the world with light for him again! But she did not stir.

"Gone?" said Cherry's heartrending voice, a mere whisper, beside him.

He turned upon her lifeless eyes.

"Gone," he echoed.

"Oh, Alix—my darling! My own big sister!" Cherry sobbed, falling to her knees and passionately kissing the peaceful face. "Oh, Alix, dearest!"

The women about broke into tears. Peter pressed his hand close against his aching eyeballs, wishing that he might cry.

"She drove here," he heard a man's voice saying in the silence, "and she must have lost control of her car for a minute. Then—do you see?—the wheel slipped on the bank. Once it got this far, no power in God's earth—"

"No power in God's earth!" another man's voice said in solemn confirmation.

"Peter," Cherry said, "will you come to me as soon as you can? I shall need you."

"As soon as I can," he answered absently.

The car drove away, and he heard Martin moan again as it moved.

"Joyce," said a man's kind voice close beside him. He recognized the voice rather than the distressed face of an old friend and neighbor. "Joyce, my dear fellow," he urged affectionately, "tell us what we may do and we'll see to it. Pull yourself together, my dear chap. Now, shall I telephone for us—an ambulance? You must help us just a little here and then we'll spare you everything else."

"Thank you, Fred," Peter answered after a moment. "Thank you. Will you help me take—my—wife—home?"

"You wish it that way?" the other man said anxiously.

"Please," Peter answered simply. And instantly there was moving and clearing in the crowd, a murmuring of whispered directions.

After a while they were at the mountain cabin, and Kow, with tears running down his yellow face, was helping them. Then they went into the old living room, and Alix was lying there, splendid, sweet, untouched, with her brave, brown forehead shadowed softly by her brown hair, and her lashes resting upon her cheeks, and her fingers clasped about the stems of three great, creamy roses.

There were other flowers all about, and there were women in the room. White draperies fell with sweeping lines from the merciful veiling of the crushed figure, and Alix might have been only asleep, and dreaming some heroic dream that lent that secret pride and joy to her mouth and filled those closed eyes with a triumph they had never known in life.

Peter stood and looked down at her, and the men and women drew back. But although the muscles of his mouth twitched, he did not weep. He looked long at her, while an utter silence filled the room and while twilight deepened into dark over the cabin and over the mountain above it.

"So that was your way out, Alix?" Peter said in the depth of his soul. "That was your solution for us all? You would go out of life, away from the sunshine and the trees and the hills that you loved, so that Cherry and I should be saved? I was blind not to see it. I have been blind from the very beginning."

Silence. The room was filling with shadows. On the mantel was a deep bowl of roses that he remembered watching her cut—was it yesterday or centuries ago?

"I was wrong," he said. "But I think you would be sorry to have me face—what I am facing now. You were always so forgiving, Alix; you would be the first to be sorry."

He put his hand over the tigerish pain that was beginning to reach his heart. His throat felt thick and choked, and still he did not cry.

"An hour ago," he said, "if it had been that the least thought of what this meant to you might have reached me an hour ago, it would not have been too late. Alix, one look into your eyes an hour ago might have saved us all! Fred," Peter said aloud, with a bitter groan, clinching tight the hands of the old friend who had crept in to stand beside him, "Fred, she was here, in all her health and joy and strength only today. And now—"

"I know—old man—" the other man muttered. He looked anxiously at Peter's terrible face. In the silence the dog whimpered faintly. But when Peter, after an endless five minutes, turned away, it was to speak to his friend in an almost normal voice.

"I must go down and see Cherry, Fred. She took her husband to the old house; they were living there."

"Helen will stay here," the old man assured him quickly. "I'll drive you down and come back here. We thought perhaps a few of us could come here tomorrow afternoon, Peter," he added timidly, with his reddened eyes filling again, "and talk of her a little, and pray for her a little, and then take her to—to rest beside the old doctor—"

"I hadn't thought about that," Peter answered, still with the air of finding it hard to link words to thought, "but that is the way she would like it. Thank you—and thank Helen for me—"

"Oh, Peter, to do anything—" the woman faltered. "She came to us, you know, when the baby was so ill—day after day—my own sister couldn't have been more to us!"

"Did she?" Peter asked, staring at the speaker steadily. "That was like her."

He went out of the house and got into a waiting car, and they drove down the mountain. Alix had driven him over this road day before yesterday—yesterday—no, it was today, he remembered.

"Thank God I don't feel it yet as I shall feel it, Thompson!" he said quietly. The man who was driving gave him an anxious glance.

"You must take each day as it comes," he answered simply.

Peter nodded, folded his arms across his chest, and stared into the early dark. There was no other way to go than past the very spot where the horror had occurred, but Thompson told his wife later that poor Joyce had not seemed to know it when they passed it. Nor did he give any evidence of emotion when they reached the old Strickland house and entered the old hallway where Cherry had come flying in, a few short years ago, with Martin's first kiss upon her lips.

Two doctors, summoned from San Francisco, were here, and two nurses. Martin had been laid upon a hastily moved bed in the old study, to be spared the narrow stairs. The room was metamorphosed, the whole house moved about it as about a pivot, and there was no thought but for the man who lay, sometimes moaning and sometimes ominously still, waiting for death.

"He cannot live!" whispered Cherry, ghastly of face, and with the utter chaos of her soul and brain expressed by her tumbled frock and the carelessly pushed back and knotted masses of her hair. "His arm is broken, Peter, and his leg crushed—they don't dare touch him! And the surgeon says the spine, too—and you see his head! Oh, God! It is so terrible," she said in agony, through shut teeth, knotting her hands together; "it is too terrible that he is breathing now, that life is there now, and that they cannot hold it!"

She led Peter into the sitting room where the doctors were waiting.

"Is there any hope?" he asked, when Cherry had gone away on one of the restless, unnecessary journeys with which she was filling the endless hours. One man shook his head, and in the silence they heard Martin groan.

"It is possible he may weather it, of course," the older man said doubtfully. "He is coming out of that first stupor, and we may be able to tell better in a short time. The fact that he is living at all indicates a tremendous vitality."

Cherry came to the door to say "Doctor!" on a burst of tears. The physicians departed at once to the study, and Peter was immediately summoned to assist them in handling the big frame of the patient. Martin was thoroughly conscious now; his face chalk white. Cherry, agonized, knelt beside the bed, her frightened eyes moving from face to face.

There was a brief consultation, then Cherry and Peter were banished.

Peter watched her with a confused sense that the whole frightful day had been a dream. Once she looked up and met his eyes.

"He can't live," she said in a whisper.

"Perhaps not," Peter answered very low. Cherry returned to her somber musing.

"We didn't see this end to it, did we?" she said with a pitiful smile after a long while.

"Oh, no—no!" Peter said, shutting his eyes and with a faint, negative movement of his head.

"Poor Cherry—if I could spare you all this!" knotting his fingers and feeling for the first time the prick of bitter tears against his eyelids.

"Oh, there is nothing you can do," she said faintly and wearily after a while. And she whispered, as if to herself, "Nothing—nothing—nothing!"

CHAPTER XIX.

It was all strange and bewildering, thought Peter. It was not like anything he had ever connected in his thoughts with Alix, yet it was all for her.

The day was warm and still, and the little church was packed with flowers and packed with people. Women were crying, and men were crying, too, rather to his dazed surprise. The organ was straining through the warm, fragrant air, and the old clergyman, whose venerable, leonine head, in its crown of snowy hair, Peter could see clearly, spoke in a voice that was thickened with tears. Strangers, or almost strangers, had been touching Peter's hand respectfully, timidly, had been praising Alix. She had been "good" to this one, "good" to that one, they told him; she had always been so "interested" and so "happy."

Her coffin was buried in flowers, many of them the plain flowers she loved, the gillies and stock and verbena, and even the sweet, sober wallflowers that were somehow like herself. But it was the roses that scented the whole world for Alix today, and fresh creamy buds had been placed between the waxen fingers. And still that radiant look of triumphant love lingered on her quiet face, and still the faint ghost of a smile touched the once kindly and merry mouth.

They said good-by to her at the church, the villagers and old friends who had loved her, and Peter and two or three men alone followed her down along the winding road that led to the old cemetery. Cherry was hanging over the bedside of her husband, who still miraculously lingered through hours of pain, but as Peter, responsive to a touch on his arm, crossed the church porch to blindly enter the waiting motor car, he saw, erect and grave, on the front seat, in his decent holiday black, and with his felt hat held in his hands, Kow, claiming his right to stand beside the grave of the mistress he had loved and served so faithfully. The sight of him, in his clumsy black, instead of the usual crisp white, and with a sad and tear-stained face shook Peter strangely, but he did not show a sign of pain.

The twisted low branches of oak trees threw shadows on the grave when they finally reached it, and sheep were cropping the watered grass of the graveyard. The soft autumn sky, the drift of snowy clouds across the blue, the clear shadows on brown grass under the oaks, all these were familiar. But Peter still looked dazedly at his black cuff and at the turned earth next to the doctor's headstone, telling himself again that this was for Alix. How often he had seen her sitting there, with her bright face sobered and sweet, as she talked lovingly, eagerly of her father! They had often come here, Peter the more willingly because she was so sensible and

This Was Alix's Grave, Newly Covered With Flowers.

happy about it; she would pack lunch, button herself into one of the crisp blue ginghams, chatter on the road in her usual fashion. And if, for a few moments, the train of memory fired by the sight of the old doctor's grave became too poignant and tears came, she always scolded herself with that mixture of childish and maternal impatience that was so characteristic of her, and that Peter had seen her use to this very father years ago!

He remembered her, a tall, awkward girl, with a volume of Dickens slipping from her lap as she sat on a hassock by the fire, teasing her father, scolding and reproaching him. Blazing red on her high cheekbones, untidy black hair, quick tongue and ready laugh; that was the Alix of the old days, when he had criticized and patronized her, and told her that she should be more like Anne and little Cherry!

He remembered being delegated, one day, to take her into town to the dentist, and that upon discovering that the dentist was not in his office, he had taken her to the circus instead. She had been about thirteen, and had eaten too many peanuts, he thought, and had lost a petticoat in full sight of the grandstand. But how grateful and happy she had been!

"Dear little old blue petticoat!" he said. "Dear little old madcap Alix—!"

There was silence, the silence of inanition, about him. He came to himself with a start. He was up on the hills, in the cemetery—this was Alix's grave, newly covered with wilting masses of flowers, and he was keeping everybody waiting. He murmured an apology; the waiting men were all kindness and sympathy.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Salt and Dampness.

Salt is what is called "hygroscopic," that is, it eagerly absorbs moisture. In fact, both air and salt are absorbents of moisture and it is a contest between them as to which gets it. Results depend on atmospheric conditions. Ordinary atmosphere always contains a proportion of moisture, and warm air is apt to be more humid than cold, as it absorbs and holds water vapor more readily than cold air. Salt has such affinity for moisture that under such conditions it draws it from the air. When the air becomes dry, the moisture is given up by the salt, which in turn becomes dry as it returns the moisture to the air.

Make Funnel From Eggshell.

When it is desired to fill narrow necked bottles and a funnel is unavailable, one can be improvised from an eggshell. The shell should be quite dry, and a small opening made at the bottom. Stand the shell so that the hole is well over the opening of the container to be filled, and proceed as with a regular funnel.

Hard Luck.

"I took my wife to the opera last night."

"Did she enjoy it?"

"She wanted me to demand my money back. Half the people whose names were on the program as boxholders were not there at all."—Exchange.

Well Equipped.

"All Gaul is divided into three parts."

"Yes?"

"Yes, and you got three of 'em."

Explaining.

Getting in at 3 a. m. he wandered into the parlor.

His wife came to the head of the stairs.

"What are you doing up at this hour?" she demanded.

"Just considering having the house wired for wireless," was his happy thought.

The Difference.

"Mrs. Spender's husband seems bent with pain!" "No, only with payin'!"—Wayside Tales.